

NARRATOR: McVey, Gene
INTERVIEWER: Troy Reeves
DATE: July 5 & 12, 2000
LOCATION: Boise, Idaho
PROJECT: Smokejumpers/Forest Fire Fighters

Tape

Counter	Summary
000	Introduction.
005	McVey offered information about his early years. He was adopted. He spent time in the Sawtooths during the summer with his father, who owned a pack string. His father was an implement dealer and owned property in the Stanley Basin.
030	McVey's mother was a nurse who desired to be a doctor, but that did not come to fruition. McVey gave further information about his mother.
050	McVey traveled throughout the southcentral Idaho mountains. He told about fishing in lakes teeming with fish, both trout and salmon.
090	When McVey reached the age of sixteen, he lied about his age to get a job with the forest service. He talked about how the forest service always looked for people to fight large project fires, particularly in the early- to mid-twentieth century. McVey's mother vouched for his false age, and he joined a group of people who fought a project fire south of Twin Falls.
120	He learned the fire trade on this fire from some old fire veterans. After this fire ended, he became a permanent employee on the Sawtooth National Forest. McVey joined a hot shot crew—stationed in Hailey—and he explained what being on a hot shot crew meant.
150	McVey's first year was 1961, which was a big fire year. His crew missed the fire-training seminar, so he learned how to fight fire on the job.
190	Since McVey was not a smokejumper, he and his crew arrived at fires in many different ways. They walked, drove, or dropped in via helicopter.
210	The helicopter pilot in 1961 had flown in Korea during the Korean War. McVey thought this man ("Mac" McAllister) was an excellent pilot who understood mountain flying well. The man could drop the crew wherever they needed to be. McVey explained how McAllister rigged a device to drop water or Bentnight Clay from the helicopter to help fight fire.
290	During the 1961 fire season, McVey fought fire on other national forests besides the Sawtooth National Forest. McVey described Hunter Nelson,

who was a fire boss on the Sawtooth National Forest, and changes in technology, particularly chainsaws.

335 When going out to a fire, McVey carried numerous tools and other devices. He described what items he brought to a fire. He focused on how fires affected his boots and feet. He also explained how hot fires left covered holes, or fire pits, in the ground where the fire burnt trees down to the ground.

415 On one particular evening, McVey and the fire crew fought a fire in McCall, Idaho, but traveled through various locations in southcentral Idaho to get there. He recalled that long evening, which turned into morning, and fighting the fire as soon as they arrived.

450 On this particular fire, McVey fell into one of these fire pits, but it was, for whatever reason, not hot. He continued to describe other aspects of this fire.

500 **END OF SIDE ONE**
TAPE ONE SIDE TWO

000 McVey continued to discuss this particular fire near McCall. They walked through a beautiful valley to get to base camp. When they returned to the fire from base camp, that valley had burnt completely.

015 During the summer of 1961, McVey fought many fires, in which he spent one to two weeks at particular fires. He remembered spending the summer constantly moving from one large project fire to the next.

040 During non-fire time, the hot shot crew toiled at many different tasks. McVey described these tasks. He then continued to describe the logistics for his crew on these large project fires. He particularly detailed how and what the crew ate. One particular fire the crew ate a meal at a base camp, and they all got sick.

090 After his first fire year, McVey returned to Twin Falls High School. He felt full of himself and really grown up. He never felt like an athlete, but he could hold his own on a fire, particularly on multi-day project fires. The busy fire season provided a lot of money for him to spend during the school year.

125 End of July 5, 2000, interview.

130 Beginning of July 12, 2000.

- 135 McVey described his mother's work as a nurse. His mother worked off and on during her life at a hospital as a nurse or a private-duty nurse. McVey's father died in 1954, so his mother became a single parent.
- 180 McVey continued to talk about her mother. She worked in Panama as a nurse, and she had many more responsibilities in Panama than in the United States. His mother was very independent, and McVey remembered her holding her own with the doctors in Twin Falls.
- 225 McVey detailed the logistics in fighting fire from the time they received the fire call until they returned to their home base. When McVey fought fire in the early 1960s, the communication and overhead leadership differed greatly from the present day. He described how it worked (communication, management) in the early 1960s.
- 280 Physical training was a part of their training. McVey talked about the physical training, as well as other training to fight fire. By the end of the first fire season, McVey knew he wanted to return. He explained how he was rehired, as well as explaining his life during the months between the 1961 and 1962 fire seasons. McVey actually spent most of the time that year in Florida at a military school.
- 330 After finishing military school, McVey returned to Twin Falls and called the district office to see if it was time to work. The 1962 fire season was not as bad as the previous year. He explained where he stayed and where he ate during the 1962 fire season.
- 360 McVey did not attend an official fire school in the late spring/early summer either fire year. He explained why he never did and who returned from the 1961 season to the 1962 season. He recalled classmates from Twin Falls who fought fire along side McVey.
- 400 For the most part, McVey can discern between events in 1961 and 1962. He remembered 1961 by the exhaustion he felt and 1962 because his "true love" married another man.
- 425 During the 1962 fire season, McVey witness two deaths on two different fires. He told his story about one of the deaths. McVey detailed the geography of that fire and the games that eventually led to one man's death.
- 500 **END OF SIDE TWO**
TAPE TWO SIDE ONE
- 000 People in the base camp and the people mopping up the fire dodged boulder and trees during their time on the fire. One evening the night

crew knocked a boulder down the hill, and it hit a moving truck. The boulder smashed the windshield and killed the driver.

- 035 On a different fire in 1962, McVey and his crew fought a fire along with an Apache fire crew. This Apache crew amazed McVey with their stamina and skill. A plane carrying fire retardant flew over the fire and dropped its load. The load knocked one of the Apache fire fighters off of a rock outcropping and killed him. On another fire McVey felt he was outside his body watching himself work and watching the fire crown and move rapidly across a heavily timbered area.
- 115 McVey slept soundly at a fire, whether he had a sleeping bag or not. One fire in the White Clouds Mountains the terrain was so steep that it felt like “trying to climb the back of God’s head.” McVey continued to describe the conditions on this specific fire, specifically when he found a burnt but perfectly preserved rattlesnake.
- 150 According to McVey the fires where the people lost their lives were on the main Salmon River. He continued to state that he did not remember where the boulder hit the truck and killed the driver.
- 180 Fire fighters who fought with McVey worked hard and played hard. He described what and where they congregated on their days off. He continued to explain what Ketchum, Idaho, was like in the early 1960s.
- 210 After one fire near McCall, Idaho, the town’s residents considered them heroes and bought their beers. He remembered in 1961 not bathing very much, because of the number of fires. They occasionally bathed and swam in a nearby hot springs.
- 240 With prompting from the interviewer, McVey mentioned some specifics places in Ketchum and Hailey, Idaho, where the fire fighters frequented. He recalled folk singer, Rosalie Sorrels, performing at a bar.
- 275 During the summers in Ketchum, there were plenty of young men and women, including people who worked for Sun Valley Corporation in the summer. McVey recalled being in Ketchum when Ernest Hemingway committed suicide.
- 305 McVey never met Hemingway, but he remembered his father meeting actors, such as Tom Mix and Cary Grant, who vacationed in the Stanley Basin in the years before World War II. McVey also remembered actress Ann Southern, who owned a sewing shop in Ketchum.
- 340 After his second summer, McVey returned to high school; he went to school in Jerome before returning eventually to Twin Falls High School.

McVey said he felt really old when returned to high school after his second summer fighting fire. He did not feel as full of himself.

380 McVey only fought fire for two summers. He said his mother told him the forest supervisor would not allow him to fight fire the third summer, because they found out he was too young.

405 His fire fighting summers taught him several things, including not being judgmental of him or others. He also learned that physical attributes did not mean everything when fighting a fire. His early years and his teenager years fighting fire gave him a strong respect for the land. Fire, for McVey, was both frightening and beautiful.

495 **END OF SIDE ONE**
TAPE TWO SIDE TWO

000 Fighting fire also taught him that being thirsty is the worst feeling in the world. McVey continued to explain the practical aspects of fighting fire, including using a shovel, have stuck with him.

020 **END OF SIDE TWO**
END OF INTERVIEW

NAMES AND PLACES INDEX

Basom, Chuck
Boise, Idaho
Booth Memorial Hospital (Boise, Idaho)
Foresters' Club, The (McCall, Idaho)
Grant, Cary
Hailey, Idaho
Hemingway, Ernest
Jerome, Idaho
Sun Bowl (Ketchum, Idaho)
Ketchum, Idaho
McAllister, "Mac"
McCall, Idaho
Mint Bar, The (Hailey, Idaho)
Mix, Tom
Nelson, Hunter
Salmon River
Satterwhite, Neil
Sawtooth National Forest (Idaho)
Slate Creek (Idaho)
Slavey's (Ketchum or Hailey, Idaho)
Sorrels, Rosalie
Southern, Ann
Stanley, Idaho
Sun Valley Corporation
Sunbeam, Idaho
Twin Falls High School
Twin Falls, Idaho
White Cloud Peaks (Idaho)